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ABSTRACT

This document comprises the remarks of Richard Riley, the U.S. Secretary of Education, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. on September 7, 2000 for his annual "Back-to-School" speech. Presented in four parts, the speech focuses on important transitions through children's education. Part 1 maintains that it is imperative that a new, sustained focus be put on birth to 5 years, especially on relationships, resilience, and readiness. This section also recommends that educators do a better job in educating parents on how they can help their children get ready for school. Part 2, dealing with middle school transition, notes the importance of engaging parents in their teens' development, and maintains that middle schools need to examine their goals as they strive to respond to students' developmental needs and to demands for student achievement. This section argues that too much of the middle school curriculum is repetitive and that teachers receive little support in out-of-field teaching. Part 3 addresses the transition to high school and advocates the creation of summer academies to help youth improve their reading and other academic skills to prevent high school dropout. This section also suggests the creation of freshman academies, the support of parent involvement, and the development of mentors. The section argues that society needs to create well-thought-out transitions or rites of passage into adulthood for all youth. Part 4 deals with reclaiming the senior year of high school for educational purposes and announces a commission to review the disconnections between K-12 and postsecondary education. (KB)

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Remarks as prepared for delivery by
U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley

Annual Back to School Address
"Times of Transition"

National Press Club
Washington, D.C.

September 7, 2000

(Webcast of Speech)

As always, I am pleased to be here at the National Press Club for my Annual Back-to-School Speech. This is the seventh time I have had the opportunity to give this speech, and over the years I have talked about a wide range of issues: family involvement, reading, setting high expectations, improving the teaching profession, and reforming the American high school-to name just a few.

I have just returned from a five-day, seven-state tour of schools in rural America. We started in Monroe, Louisiana, and finished 20 stops later in Paducah, Kentucky. What I noticed most about the trip was the weather. Every time I stepped off my Success Express School Bus, the local people who came to greet me announced that the record for heat had just been broken in their community. In each place, the temperature was always between 103 and 112 degrees.

Now, I have very good people on my staff. But the next time we plan a bus trip, I'm going to have a weatherman on my staff.

I took this bus trip through rural America to make an important point-that the education of children in our nation's small towns cannot be ignored. Twenty-five percent of all our school children live in small towns all over America.

When it comes to our children, let's always remember that children everywhere have big dreams and great ambitions. Yet, schools in small towns too often have to struggle because of limited resources and a shrinking tax base. On my trip I put a strong focus on the issues that matter in rural America, with a particular emphasis on constructing schools, reducing class size, and overcoming the digital divide.

We know what works when it comes to improving American education, whether a child lives in a small town, a growing suburb or a very large city. A strong emphasis on early childhood education, reading, smaller classes, quality teaching, better accountability and more after-school opportunities makes a powerful difference.

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On Tuesday, the president outlined his priorities as Congress came back into session. I want to underscore that his priorities are the right priorities when it comes to improving American education.

One of our chief priorities is our small class initiative. This is why I am releasing today a detailed report on the progress that has been made during the first year of this important effort. *The Class-Size Reduction Program: Boosting Student Achievement in Schools Across the Nation - A First-Year Report* is available today.

We have only just begun this effort, but already 1.7 million children have received the additional help they need because of this initiative.

And I must tell you that everywhere I go, community leaders tell me that they need help when it comes to modernizing their schools. We have 53 million children going to school this year-a new national record-and too many of our schools simply are bursting at their seams or wearing out from over use.

This is why I urge the Congress to pass the bipartisan Johnson-Rangel School Construction bill that has the support of 226 members-a clear majority of House members, Democrats and Republicans alike. Our schools need to be palaces of learning, not row after row of portables filling up the playgrounds.

If Congress doesn't pass this and other important education legislation, I'm afraid that many parents and teachers around the country will come to the conclusion that really this is a "do-nothing" Congress.

Today, I want to talk about the important transitions that take place as young people go through their schooling. Sending a child off to school for the first time or to a new school is an age-old ritual that has been played out in millions of homes across America during the last month. These transitions mark a coming of age, and they are important milestones in the lives of America's families.

How children make these transitions-starting school for the first time, leaving elementary school to enter a middle school and then on to high school, and then graduating from high school and hopefully going on to college or meaningful careers-deserves our full attention. We have learned a great deal in the last few years about these transitions, and we need to make sure that we are applying what we are learning.

The Early Years: Sparking a Child's Mind

New brain research tells us the amazing impact that parents and other caregivers can have in helping children's brains develop. Every conversation a child hears and every nursery rhyme a child listens to as she or he is rocked to sleep are food for the brain.

We now know that it is absolutely imperative that we put a new, powerful, and sustained focus on the early years-0 to 5-before children even enter first grade. Put simply, the stronger the start, the better the finish. Our children are eager to learn, they are creative in how they learn, and they have an extraordinary capacity to learn. It is up to us to know how to encourage them so that this will and these capacities are set into motion and sustained.

We need to focus on what we like to call the 3Rs-relationships, resilience, and readiness. These are some of the keys to success-not only for our youngest children but for older students as well. We know that the single most important characteristic that defines a high-quality early childhood program is the ability of a teacher to develop a warm, positive relationship with each child. The ability of a child to engage in this type of relationship starts elsewhere and much earlier-in the home.

I am such a vigorous supporter of extending the Family and Medical Leave Act because it gives parents more time with their newborn infants. I urge employers to recognize the long-term benefits to our society of giving parents this extra time off to care for their infants. And I urge parents to spend more time with their children, to read to them and with them every chance they get. Reading to a child while holding them on your lap or in a quiet place develops a love of reading in the child. Helping a child build a vocabulary through reading and conversation is the foundation of that child's reading success.

Last year, the Department released our first national survey of 3,600 kindergarten teachers, and I was struck by two facts. First, less than half of all parents are reading to their toddlers every day. The teachers also told us that 48 percent of the children in their classes had moderate to serious problems in making the transition into kindergarten.

So we need to do a much better job of helping parents understand the enormous difference they can make in helping their children get ready for school. Teachers need to make the connection with parents even before their children start school to lay the groundwork for a smooth transition. And school systems need to give teachers their class lists early on so they have time to contact and even visit with parents.

Our schools have another role to play as well. Just a few months ago, the National Research Council released a significant report entitled "Eager to Learn." This report makes the important point that every preschool program should have on staff a teacher with a bachelor's degree or with expertise in early childhood education.

And just yesterday a new and very important report was released entitled "A Good Beginning." This report, released by a consortium of mental health and education groups, including my Department, tells us what we need to know about a child's social and emotional readiness for school. Social and emotional competence is, the report notes, just as critical for school success as are cognitive skills.

All of this research-from sparking the development of a child's brain to providing good beginnings in pre-school-challenges us to do many things. It requires us to change our thinking about how children learn to think. It requires us to redouble our efforts to give parents the time they need to be good parents.

And it certainly challenges us to move beyond the current system of early childhood efforts that is still a patchwork of programs defined by high turnover, little training and minimal compensation.

This is why I am such a strong supporter of voluntary, universal pre-school. Giving child-care workers better compensation and

professional training and having a quality teacher on the staff, can go a long way toward ensuring that many more of our children are eager and ready to learn.

All of these studies also suggest that a concentrated effort in the early years may provide us with the richest opportunity we have to close the achievement gap that already exists when children enter kindergarten.

And here let me be direct. We do too much over-labeling. Far too many children, especially minorities and boys, are tracked into special education often because we simply haven't given their first teachers the skills they need to help these children early on.

We need to put a much sharper focus on why boys struggle with reading in the earliest years of their schooling. Our prisons are full of illiterate young men. There is a connection here that we need to understand and work on.

In response to this growing body of research, our administration has "front-loaded" many of our policies and programs. Title I funds can now be used for pre-school. We have put new funding into helping infants with disabilities. We have asked Congress for $30 million to help us improve early childhood education. I would be remiss if I did not mention the good work of Bill Goodling and Dale Kildee in developing and supporting Even Start, a family literacy initiative that is making a difference.

The administration has also nearly doubled Head Start, expanding funding by 90 percent since 1993. In addition, the 1998 Head Start reauthorization promoted school readiness and family literacy. Early in this administration, we set a new national goal of making sure that every child can read well by the end of the third grade, if not earlier.

The Middle Years: A Great Transition

Now let me turn to another important transition-when children leave elementary school and start middle school and then transition on to high school. Five years ago, Dr. David Hamburg, formerly President of the Carnegie Corporation, authored a very important study entitled "Great Transitions" which focused on the importance of early adolescence.

In this report, Dr. Hamburg put great stress on "re-engaging" parents, recognizing the link between health and education, recognizing that serious behavior problems tend to cluster, and recognizing the important role of the entire community in helping young people through this time of great change.

Five years later, I am pleased to note that real progress has been made. The teenage pregnancy rate is down, youth violence is down, and many more adults are acting as mentors to young people all across America.

And, as all parents know, they need all the help they can get during this great transition. Puberty hits with all the force that Mother Nature can muster. The mood swings are enormous as children stretch, explore, create, and discover who they are.

To help all of our children make this great transition, we need to do several things. Parents need be involved, stay involved, and, when they

are ready to throw up their hands in absolute frustration, they need to hang in there.

Our kids don't make it easy for us at times, but a positive relationship with a parent is still the best safeguard a young teenager can have in this period of growth and experimentation. Being there to help a budding teenager sort through all that is wondrous, confusing, and exciting makes a powerful difference.

Our nation's middle schools also need to take a second look at what they are hoping to accomplish. There is a real debate going on among middle school educators as they seek to find a new balance between responding to the developmental needs of their students and responding to the new demands for student achievement.

There is always a tendency in American education to get caught up in what I call the "either/or" syndrome. More than a few middle school educators seem to be caught up in this syndrome at the moment. The choice is not whether we focus on the developmental needs of our young people or their academic achievement. We need to do both and we cannot lower our expectations about what our children can achieve academically during these important years.

In my opinion, too much of the curriculum in our nation's middle schools is repetitive and too often teachers are being asked to teach out-of-field with little or no real support. One telling fact puts this into sharp relief. According to the Southern Regional Education Board, only 11 percent of eighth-grade science classes in the South, are taught by teachers who have a major in science. This is not fair to the students or to the teachers who are put into this position.

This is why we need to help our nation's middle schools develop challenging and engaging curriculum. We need to have higher expectations about what our children can achieve. That is one reason why I have pushed to make sure students in the eighth grade are learning algebra.

We also know that young people in the seventh and eighth grades are already setting their own expectations. Even before they start high school, many eighth-graders are deciding whether or not they are college material. This is why we created GEAR UP, an exciting partnership that matches middle schools with colleges and universities and other partners across America.

GEAR UP, like the well-established TRIO programs, seeks to raise the expectations of each child, and, at the same time, help middle schools strengthen their curriculum. All of these programs deserve the full support of the Congress.

Finally, we need to recognize that children in early adolescence really are as Dr. Hamburg notes " great explorers of the unknown." Sometimes that "unknown" can be harmful, and we need to be exceedingly vigilant when it comes to smoking, the use of drugs and alcohol, and sexual experimentation. We know that 28 percent of eighth-graders are already experimenting with drugs, and a majority have used alcohol.

Parents and schools need the help of the entire community in preventing

young people from making early mistakes that can have lifelong consequences. This is why there is such a strong demand for after-school opportunities that help young people use their afternoons constructively and stay out of harm's way. Congress can make an important contribution to meeting this demand by supporting the president's $1 billion request for after-school funding.

The High School Years: Reaching for Adulthood

The transition to high school is also very challenging. Young people usually go from small schools to very large and often impersonal schools. Academic scores can drop as much as 18 percent. Young people at the margin who are lost in the shuffle or struggling academically start thinking of dropping out. Indeed, the freshman year of high school is the year when most high school students tragically commit suicide.

Last year, I came to the Press Club and spoke at length about reforming the American high school. Establishing a strong focus on creating an effective transition between middle school and high school should be high on our collective agenda as part of this reform.

We need to create summer academies to help young people improve their reading and other academic skills so they don't give up and dropout. We need to break up big schools into schools-within-schools and stop building high schools that are the size of shopping malls. Small, personalized schools make a difference.

We need to create freshman academies or houses so groups of young people stay together and have regular contact with the same set of advisors. And we need to get the message out to every parent that now is not the time to back out of your teenager's life.

And we need many other adults stepping up to act as role models and mentors. The author, Patricia Hersch, in her wonderful in-depth book on American adolescence entitled "A Tribe Apart," writes, "Every adolescent needs a mentor, not just deprived children in inner cities. Kids need adults to listen to them and to serve as role models. Grown-ups who, by their availability and presence, convey a sense of safety and control."

Conveying a sense of safety and control as young people naturally challenge boundaries is something that we need to invest more time in doing. Ancient societies had well-established and challenging "rites of passage" that required young people to grow, to be tested, and to internalize the values of the community as a stepping stone to adulthood.

Too often today, we leave the modern "rite of passage" to a gang initiation or a hazing practice on a high school sport team or club that gets out of hand and becomes dangerous. As a society we do need to create well-thought-out transitions or "rites of passage" into adulthood for all of our young people. The way we do this affects a student's education in a very important way.

Changing the Senior Year: Making It Matter

This leads me to my final comment about transitions. Here I am talking about the transition from high school to college or taking the first step to gaining a meaningful career. By the time many high school students get

to their senior year they are ready to check out. They are bored, they feel unchallenged, and they are ready to move on. As I have said before, the senior year of high school now seems to be a lost opportunity that we need to reclaim.

This is why I am pleased to announce that the *Commission on the Senior Year of High School*, led by Governor Paul Patton of Kentucky, will hold its first meeting next Monday here in Washington. This commission will begin a yearlong review of the senior year of high school, of the disconnects between K-12 and post-secondary education. We can improve the transition into college or a career.

A distinguished group of Americans have joined this commission, from college presidents to high school principals and high school students. I am sure that when the commission finishes its work next year it will have some thought-provoking recommendations.

My speech today has been about the many important transitions in the life of America's schoolchildren. Young people tell us, in a most emphatic way, that these transitions matter to them and that they need our help.

I have stressed the importance of these transition periods because we need to prepare for them; we need to recognize that it is during these transitions that the expectations we set may matter most; and we need to realize that we must always be listening to our children.

Patricia Hersch, again, may have captured it best when she said in her book, "kids need adults who bear witness to the details of their lives and count them as something. They require the watchful eyes and the community standards that provide great stability. They need appreciation for who they are."

So let us, as she says, "bear witness to the details of their lives," watch over our children as they grow and stretch their minds, and appreciate the lives of all of our young people as this new school year begins.

Thank you.

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